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ABSTRACT

This paper builds on previous work which analyzed ways of speaking, the use of space, and relationship formation in the work and play of organizations, in order to determine how youth develop a sense of self, empowerment, and persistence. Examined here are the speech interactions taken from three teaching lessons involving youth and youth leaders in a church youth group. The youth group consisted of four Euro-American leaders, ranging in age from 22 to 38 years and the youth consist primarily of Euro-American and Hispanic-American males and females with one Asian male, and range from 13 to 18 years of age. A politeness theory was utilized to identify the types of agendas which were constructed through each interaction. Data were obtained through observation, tape recordings, field notes, and brief interviews. Included is a discussion of "face" and "face threatening acts" (FTAs) as these relate to self-esteem and group interactions. Examples of conversations and FTAs are provided for each of the three sessions. Data analysis revealed that the normative behaviors for appropriate ways of speaking in the youth group did not deny youth the opportunity to negotiate and maintain their own or others' "face" through positive-, negative-, and off-record politeness strategies. Although some youth tended to address the leaders using FTAs, the leaders were able to draw the youth back to the lesson. The adolescents mixed politeness strategies to modify and redefine their relationships with the leaders and one another. (RJM)

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Testing the Limits of Politeness:

Youth Group Talk in a Community Organization

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Running Head: Youth Group Talk

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Testing the Limits of Politeness: Youth Group Talk in a Community Organization

Policy makers and practitioners are beginning to realize that community organizations provide resources which families and schools are unable to give to youth (Heath & McLaughlin, 1991). Based on experience in studying schools and subordinated populations, Heath and McLaughlin (1993a) noticed that "youngsters whose inner strength got them through the toughest of community, home, and school situations were often linked in some way with neighborhood-based organizations" (p. 2). Heath and McLaughlin began to examine non-school organizations which offer multiple services and support for adolescent youths in diverse urban settings. To understand how youth were enabled to develop a sense of self, empowerment, and persistence, Heath concentrated on ways of speaking, use of space, and relationship formation in the work and play of organizations.

In this paper, I will focus on the speech interactions and relations that are formed between and among youth and youth leaders in a church youth group. In particular, I will examine data from the speech events (Hymes, 1974) of three teaching lessons. According to Mehan (1979), speech events are "routinized forms of behavior, delineated by well-defined boundaries and well-defined sets of behavior within those boundaries" and are "dependent upon participation by many parties for the assembly of their structure" (p. 190). Throughout the analysis, I will utilize Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory to identify the types of agendas which are constructed through each interactional event. The findings will be compared and contrasted to teacher-learning interactions in the school and the

characteristics of successful youth organizations, as described by Heath and McLaughlin (1991, 1993a).

Methodology

The data on which this paper is based are drawn from three Saturday-night youth group meetings which occurred in the spring of 1994. The church affiliate is non-denominational and located in central Texas. The church believes the Bible is the infallible Word of God and the only way to receive forgiveness of sins and eternal life is through Jesus Christ. Those who have received Christ are to be "led by the Holy Spirit" and live according to the Word of God (personal communications, May 14, 1994).

The youth group consists of four Euro-American leaders, ranging in age from 22 to 38 years. Three are male and one is female. The youth consist primarily of Euro-American and Hispanic-American males and females, with one Asian male, and range from 13 to 18 years of age. Group membership is open to youths when they reach seventh grade and ends usually after they graduate from high school.

The data were obtained through observation. Meetings were tape-recorded and supplemented by field notes and brief interviews with the youth group leaders and several youth members. The tapes were transcribed and checked for accuracy by the researcher and another observer. Transcription conventions were adopted from Goodwin and Goodwin (1992) and Tannen (1989).

Theoretical Framework for Analysis

Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory provides a framework for a micro analysis of the strategies which are embedded in individual language usage. The theory is derived from certain assumptions about "face" and individual self-esteem. Three main strategies of politeness are addressed in the theory: a) positive politeness, which is an expression of solidarity; b) negative politeness, which stands as an expression of restraint; and c) off-record politeness, which seeks to avoid unequivocal impositions. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), the use of each strategy is related to social determinants, especially the relationships between the speaker and addressee and the potential offensiveness of the message content.

The notion of "face" acknowledges that one can be embarrassed or humiliated (Brown & Levinson, 1987): "Face is something that is emotionally invested, and that can be lost, maintained, or enhanced, and must be constantly attended to in interaction" (p. 61). It is assumed that under normal circumstances, people recognize the mutual vulnerability of face and strive to maintain one another's face through cooperative activity. Negative face, a derivative of non-imposed politeness, is defined as an individual desire to be free to act without imposition by the other, while positive face represents the individual's "desire to be ratified, understood, approved of, liked or admired" (p. 62).

The theory also accounts for instances which run contrary to the desire to maintain face on the part of the speaker and/or addressee and, through certain kinds of speech acts, intrinsically threaten face. Such an act is called a "face-threatening act" (FTA). Brown and Levinson (1987) provide a schematic set of strategies individuals may employ:

1. Perform the FTA on record when the participants have a clear understanding of the communicative intention which led the actor to do so;
2. Perform the FTA off record when one does not want to be held accountable for having committed the act due to any specific intent and, thereby, uses certain linguistic strategies which permit the actor to negotiate the message's meaning with the participants;
3. Perform the FTA baldly and without redressive action when fear of retribution from the addressee does not exist and circumstances such as thefollowing are present:
   (a) in the interest of efficiency or urgency, the speaker (S) and hearer (H) decide to suspend any relevance to face,
   (b) when the danger to H's face is extremely small and is in his/her best interests,
   (c) when the S is more powerful than H or has the ability to "enlist audience support to destroy H's face without losing his own" (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 69);
4. Perform the FTA with redressive action in the attempt to counteract any potential for the addressee to "lose face"--done with modifications or additions which signify to the H that a face threat is not intended or desired--in one of two forms:
   (a) positive politeness in which S approaches H as a respected person and desire to satisfy the wants of H,
   (b) negative politeness in which S wishes to avoid any appearance of

> imposing upon the addressee's freedom of action and does so through the use of apologies, linguistic deferences and passives which distance S from H, hedges, and other linguistic devices which give the addressee "a face-saving line of escape" (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 70);

5. Do not perform the FTA.

Before the seriousness of an FTA can be assessed, one must understand the interactions and influences of the following three sociological variables which affect most cultures: a) the social distance between S and H; b) the power of both S and H; and c) the ranking that an imposition has in a particular culture (Brown & Levinson, 1987). At the same time, however, the model recognizes that individuals may attempt to exploit one or more of the politeness strategies by a) attempting to reformulate one or more of the three sociological variables or b) using an unexpected strategy to convey irony or an insult. Interactants may mix positive- and negative- politeness strategies to modify the direction of an interaction, redefine social relationships, and control the amount of distance or closeness that exists between the S and H. Furthermore, the "mood" of the S or H, at any given moment, will affect the individual's definition of the three sociological variables (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

The Context

The Saturday-night youth group meetings begin at 7:00 P. M. Because the church meets in a rented facility rather than a church building, the youth assemble in the same room where church services are held. The chairs on the right side of the room are set up for church services while the chairs on the left front side have

been rearranged to configure a large semi-circle. The first 15 or 20 minutes are unstructured and the youngsters typically group in small clusters to discuss what has happened the previous week. A kitchen runs off of the room where they meet and some groups bring chips, drinks, and/or sandwiches to eat as they talk. The youth are relaxed and frequently joke with one another about issues related to school, social activities and peer relations, or family matters. During this time, contemporary Christian music is being played over the sound system and, from time to time, individuals sing along or dance with the music.

Prior to the meeting, a group of youth go into the pastor's office with the youth group leader and pray for the meeting and one another. About 7:30, the meeting officially begins with a prayer offered by a youth leader and/or one or more of the youth and is followed by worship and praise. A male youth leader runs the sound system while the female youth leader joins the youth in a group as they sing along with tapes of youth-oriented songs of praise and worship. The words are displayed on a screen. The youth are not forced to sing or participate. However, they are encouraged to clap or "lift their hands to the Lord" as they sing. The younger females tend to cluster with the older females while the males stand off to the side or stand with some of the older females. After praise and worship, the youth are seated, one of the leaders prays, and, according to the youth leaders and several youth members (J. O. & S. O., personal communications, May 14, 1994), this is when the formal teaching lesson begins.

An Analysis of Youth Group Interaction

To apply politeness theory and determine the seriousness of any FTA in the interaction(s) of a teaching lesson, one must also understand the influence

which a third-party audience has on the interaction as well as the cultural factors which determine what is or is not acceptable in social interaction. Hymes (1972) notes that "the classroom is an expression of community norms, beliefs, values, aspirations as well; often enough it is a battlefield of contention between conflicting conceptions of such things" (p. xxxiii).

Because the contexts from which the data are drawn are teaching lessons, I am assuming that certain norms for interaction exist in the youth group meetings as well. The youngsters recognize the leader is the teacher. However, not all of the youth are willing to "go along" with the lesson. Rather than conforming their behaviors to the "accepted norms of being educated" through "coercive techniques to capture and restructure" (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1984, p. 207) the youths' attention, many of the youth engage in verbal strategies to maintain and/or enhance their own self-esteem. According to Mehan (1979), analyzing the display of behavior in learning lesson interactions between participants should serve as the primary source of data. "If it is a phenomenon, it must be in the interaction" (Sacks, cited in Mehan, 1979, p. 24) functions as the methodological axiom.

To understand how individuals manage confrontations and "how face regard (and sanctions for face regard) are incorporated in religious or political systems" (p. 14), an ethnographic description of how people articulate face notions, personal rights to action, and the ways their interactions affect daily life is necessary (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 14). Utilizing excerpts from interactions which occurred in three teaching lessons, I will identify how some of

the youth resist or question the norms, beliefs and aspirations of the youth leader by performing FTAs baldly, with or without redressive action.

Lesson One

The lesson from which the first excerpt is taken occurred after the youth had broken into two groups to build a box from scratch, using cardboard, scissors, tape and magic marker pens. Prior to the activity, the youth leader simply instructed them of their task, divided them into groups, and gave them the materials they needed--none of the youth had any idea why they were building a box. The two completed boxes have been brought into the meeting room and set next to one another for the youth to examine. After several preliminary remarks and bragging about whose box is bigger, the youth settle into the lesson:

1	L1:	We've got- We've got two boxes. (1.0)	
2		They look fairly the same, right? (2.0)	
→ 3	B3:	Not really.. Ki: nda.. They're a little wobbly, I think.	
→ 4	B2:	Jus' a little bit.	
5	B4:	Huh- hh- hh- hh- hh-	
6	G5:	Tha's because we have such good tape on 'um.	
→ 7	L1:	I wannusano.. How can we tell?	
→ 8	B3:		Talking much?
→ 9	G4:		Who's we:: ?
10	L1:	Does anybody ever guess =	
→ 11	G4:		Yeah, bu' ya' have to send it UPS
12	L1:	Has anybody ever guess=	
→ 13	G4:		Huh- hh- hh- *hh, hh- hh- Wrong deal *hh

→ 14 G2: Sh- hh- hh-

15 L1: = Has anybody guessed what these boxes represent yet?

→ 16 G3: A LI: FE?!

17 G4: No..

→ 18 G3: Huh- hah- hh *hhh. WHY DON'T WE NAME IT GA: FFY?!

19 G1-5: Huh- hh- hh- hh?!

20 B1: Ya <u>all</u> are the ones who <u>named</u> it?! ((laughter))

21 L1: This- this box- this box (0.5)

22 Each one of these boxes represents an individual. (1.0)

23 An individual (3.0) =

24 B2: Wha:: t?

25 L1: We're gonna study

→ 26 We're goin to study each one of these boxes- as a <u>Chri:</u> stian.

→ 27 G3: Oo: ho:?! ((laughter))

28 L1: OK?

→ 29 B2: O:: K

To introduce the lesson, the male leader advances a proposition to the youth about the status of the boxes, asking for their validation. One male youth (L. 3) responds, however, by giving a dispreferred answer of "not really, " mitigated by hedges of "kinda" and "I think." Rather than agreeing with his peer, the other male (L. 4) uses positive politeness to counteract the youth leader's danger of "losing face." The youth leader continues his question and answer technique but slurs his words together (L. 7). The same male who disagreed with the leader draws the attention of the group to the leader's verbal slip (L. 8) by

performing the FTA baldly without redressive action. A female answers the youth leader's question by asking another question which requires the leader to qualify his meaning of "we" (L. 9).

Rather than allowing the group to get him off the track of his intended question, the leader ignores the statement and restates the question. The same female interrupts the leader baldly with an affirmative answer and then gives an irrelevant answer (L. 11). Again the leader ignores the FTA by restating the question, only to be interrupted one more time by the same female. She alone is laughing, however, and corrects herself by performing a FTA off record (L. 13). Another female (L. 14) performs a FTA on record by trying to get others to be quiet.

The leader is finally able to ask his question. Another female yells out what she thinks is the right answer (L. 16). Similar to the parables taught by Jesus, as recorded in the Gospels of the New Testament, objects are often used to represent other people or aspects of life. Therefore, her reply would be considered an appropriate answer to the question. Instead of letting the leader continue the lesson, she then laughs and gives the box a name (L. 18).

The leader ignores the dialogue which takes place between several members of the group but reconfirms the youth's response of "life" when he answers his own question (L. 22, 23). He then tells the group what the purpose of the boxes and the lesson is (L. 26). Although the purpose of the lesson is met with laughter (L. 27), the leader receives ratification through the response of the male who previously used a positive politeness strategy to save the face of the leader in the beginning of the lesson (L. 29). By agreeing more directly with the

leader, the male (B2) clearly demonstrates his respect, at this point, for the leader and desire to satisfy the wants of the leader.

Lesson Two

The male leader has prefaced his lesson by telling the group they will be talking about future plans for the youth group. He stressed the importance of the lesson and the need for them to "listen to what God is saying" because "everything that He's been doing in this group is leading somewhere." The group has just reviewed some of their youth activities from the past when the youth leader asks them why they have chosen to come to youth group:

1	L1:	N' I wanna a: sk (0.5), 'n' throw this out for- for deba: te =
2	B2:	OK.
3	L2:	= why are we he: re? (4.0)
4	B2:	In youth grou' ?
5	L2:	Ye:s. Why are we in this youth group?
6	B2:	Like =
7	L1:	= Why are we here? =
8	B2:	= in this
9	L1:	= Why are we here tonight?
→ 10	B2:	= messed up circle?
11	L1:	Yeah. This- this-
→ 12	G4:	Cause our pa: rents made us.
→ 13	B3:	Tha's a very good reason. ((laughter)) (3.0)
→ 14	L1:	Yeah, the: re's one. There's one answer =
→ 15	B3:	My da: d did.

→ 16 L1: = For some of us, that's pretty truthful.

→ 17 B4: 'Ull, my dad didn't want us to ha: ve (0.5) /?/ set

18 L1: Besides that answer, what e: lse?

19 G3: Bu' Ann said you

→ 20 G5: I ha:: ve to hh- be here tonight.

Instead of answering the question, the same male who supported the leader in the previous lesson bypasses the question and focuses on the arrangement of the chairs (L. 10). The leader begins to agree with the response, only to be interrupted by a female youth who, without redressive action and in no uncertain terms, tells the leader she is there because of her parents and not by her own choice (L. 12). A male validates her remark (L. 13) and gets a rise of laughter out of the youth audience, creating an opportunity to threaten the face of the leader.

Instead of reacting negatively, however, the leader relinquishes his right to respond as an authoritative figure and recognizes her answer as a possible answer (L. 14). Again, the male applies his father to the situation, telling the group his father made him come (L. 15). The leader does not deny the right of the respondents to vent their frustration. Instead, he shows that he understands some of the youth may not voluntarily be attending the meetings (L. 16). A third youth also refers to his father (L. 17). The topic appears to be going toward a discussion of some of the difficulties the youth may be having with their parents. The leader, however, changes the flow of the discussion and gets alternative responses from the group (L. 18). Prior to the change of subject, one more female tells the group she is being required to attend the youth meeting (L. 20).

Lesson Three

The third lesson is taught by another male leader. He is the father of Steve. In addition, Steve's mother has come to the youth group meeting and is sitting three rows behind the semi-circle. The ratio of female to male youth in the meeting is three to one. The lesson is much shorter and, for the most part, flows smoothly. When the leader confronts his son with a question, however, the son demonstrates his derision for being put on the spot in front of his friends:

→ 1 L2: Alright, Steve, you tell me what compassionate means.
→ 2 B2: Ye: ah, Steve.
→ 3 B3: You tell Me:: ?!
→ 4 G3: Tell us about the definition?
→ 5 L2: OK- How bout what's the opposite of compassion? =
→ 6 B2: I hafta to know 'fore I c'n
→ 7 tell ya what the definition is.

In most of the questions the leader has asked the youth to this point, he has used positive and negative politeness forms and/or has performed the FTA on record. When he calls on his son for input, however, he targets his son and "tells" him to provide a definition to the group (L. 1). Steve's friend reiterates the imperative (L. 2). Steve chooses to resist his father by performing the FTA baldly without redressive action (L. 3).

Another youth draws the attention away from possible conflict by breaking in and asking a question (L. 4). The father also breaks in and ignores his son's direct affront to face by asking a different question (L. 5). Instead of supporting the leader, the male youth interrupts by informing the leader that he cannot tell the opposite meaning of a word if he does not know what the original meaning of the word is (L. 6, 7). In the case of the male youth, to achieve efficiency by telling the leader why one is having trouble responding to a

particular question would be an appropriate reason for performing a FTA baldly without redressive action.

Comparison to Teaching and Learning in the Classroom

Regarding teacher-student discourse in the classroom, Bloome and Knott (1985) note certain interactional standards determine "who gets to talk, what gets talked about, and when, where, and how interactions are facilitated or impeded" (p. 54). Two sets of norms for what type of participation is appropriate are established. The teacher's agenda is governed by official rules and the student peer culture operates according to unofficial rules (Cazden, 1990). In most cases, the values and norms of each group create conflict. Typically, students are expected to repress their own background knowledge and respond to questions and/or activities which fit into a "school" framework.

Learning lessons in public schools are normally based on predetermined curriculum objectives. Unlike teachers in the schools, leaders in this youth group teach what they believe God wants them to teach. The subject and content of the lesson is chosen after prayer and "time with God" (personal communications, May 14, 1994). The prevailing value which guides the leaders and "believers" in the group is that "God is in control" and "He knows what is best for the group" (personal communications, April 9, 1994). Even though the youth take certain liberties when interacting with the leaders and one another, most of them know "how far they can go" and "when they've crossed the line." Most of them also believe the leaders really care about them even though some don't always like being there (personal communications, May 14, 1994).

Characteristics of Successful Youth Organizations

Although successful youth organizations have some link to education, they differ in form and function from schools. Many youth attend these organizations because they feel the schools have "rejected and labeled them by *what they are not* rather than *what they are*" (Heath & McLaughlin, 1993a, p. 4). Furthermore, the organization provides a forum for each member to discuss their problems and successes in school. Natural and developmentally appropriate activities, which require youth to use literacy skills often deemed necessary by schools, are also available. Because the youth have diverse preferences for the types of activities they wish to pursue, each organization meets a specific purpose and "youth well served by one would likely be uninterested in another" (Heath & McLaughlin, 1993b, p. 236).

Heath and McLaughlin (1993a) frequently found that workers involved in the youth centers often volunteer their time due to "their conviction of the value of their work to other causes, such as organized religion or community cohesion" (p. 4). They also found that "in many cases, youngsters able to stay in school and out of trouble also attended strict religious institutions" (Heath & McLaughlin, 1993b, p. 224). Many of the effective religious organizations provide a clear, coherent value system; a positive belief in self and future; and are "youth centered, strictly disciplined, and strongly demanding of loyalty and obedience" (Heath & McLaughlin, 1993b, p. 226).

Although the church organization I visited does not offer a wide range of activities for their youth, it is staffed by individuals who are deeply committed to providing a relaxed setting where young people can regularly meet and talk about issues that are important to them. The director of the youth group expressed a

desire to "hear what God says to do and do it" (J. O., personal communication, May 14, 1994). He stressed that "Jesus is the Head of the Church" and they, as leaders, are bound by an obligation to fit in with the vision of the church: to meet the needs of the young people as well as reach out to the needs of the community.

Heath & McLaughlin (1993b) note that youth tend to avoid programs which seek to achieve goals of "social control" and choose activities that "convey respect rather than condemnation for who they are and hope rather than fear for what they can become" (p. 234). Based on the replies of some youth (youth meeting, April 9, 1994) as well as my conversations with the youth leaders (personal communications, May 14, 1994), many of the teens are not attending the meetings by choice. For them, then, the youth organization represents a form of social control and serves as a constraining force on who they are and what they wish to become.

On the other hand, other youth express excitement about the future plans the group leaders have to reach out and minister to the needs of other youth and engage in activities which will involve collaboration with other church youth groups in the community (personal communications, May 14, 1994). A recent youth concert at the church attracted youngsters from other churches and enabled teens to share their faith and enjoy contemporary Christian music with one another (personal communications, May 14, 1994). Many of the same youth are also preparing to march together in the "March for Jesus" rally in June of 1994. These youth view the lessons as situationally relevant, complemented by activities which allow them to engage in cooperative language and learning behaviors. One of the youth I spoke with feels she can express herself without

being judged--a feeling she said "doesn't always happen at school" (personal communications, May 14, 1994).

Conclusion

Brown and Levinson (1987) maintain that "while the content of face will differ in different cultures ....the mutual knowledge of members' public self-image or face, and the social necessity to orient oneself to it in interaction, are universal" (pp. 61, 62). How can youth learn to negotiate meaning and establish social relationships through interaction? The normative behaviors for appropriate ways of speaking in this church youth group did not deny youth the opportunity to negotiate and maintain their own and others' "face" through positive-, negative-, and off-record politeness strategies. In fact, youth were able to mix politeness strategies to modify and redefine their relationships with the leaders and one another. By the same token, the youth were well aware of the conversational boundaries which existed. Despite the tendency of the youth to address the leaders using FTAs , the leaders were able to draw the youth back to the lesson.

Twenty years ago, Bernstein (1972) challenged educators, stating "if the culture of the teacher is to become part of the consciousness of the child, then the culture of the child must first be in the consciousness of the teacher" (p. 149). For some of the youth, this youth organization represents a system of control and domination. For others, it serves as a place where they can question and mediate differences in beliefs and opinions, learn how to establish social relationships through interaction, and find meaning and purpose through community activities and outreach. Currently, this organization is not meeting the specific purposes of all the youth in attendance. Nonetheless, the organization does offer an

interactional environment where both the "teacher" and the "learner" can experiment and test the limits of politeness with one another. Hopefully, the experiences will enable them to move one step closer toward mastering the complexity of "interactional footwork" that is involved in achieving communicative competence our society.

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